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ABSTRACT

The United States Department of Education invited leading professionals who work in the library field in federal agencies, universities, associations, and foundations to a meeting in Washington, DC to explore the need for national focus on library research. Each participant suggested a research issue of particular concern to their organization and the challenges involved in supporting research on the topic. Next, the group reviewed past research related to libraries and explored several types of structures that promote quality research, including federally sponsored national research centers, multi-agency national research roundtables, and university-supported research centers. The meeting concluded with recommendations for further action. Five critical issues were revealed which were all linked by information technology: Participants raised questions about the quality of libraries and their future role, and impact on local communities, intellectual property rights and responsibilities, and the difficulties associated with the preservation of digital and printed materials. Each of these issues is discussed, as well as general library research issues. The suggestions for possible next steps and a list of meeting participants are also included. (AEF)

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- Research unique to libraries
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Building and Supporting Library Research: A National Focus

Proceedings from an Exploratory Workgroup

April 1998

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Building and Supporting Library Research: A National Focus

Proceedings from an Exploratory Workgroup April 1998

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Research and Libraries

Rapid advances in technology have dramatically changed the way the nation's libraries serve their patrons. Even greater changes are in store as the 21st century approaches. Research could play a vital role in helping librarians design and operate libraries of the future so that they provide information and services more effectively to their communities.

While librarians recognize the need for research, few actually conduct research, and the research that is done in this field is often isolated and uncoordinated. Also, the quality of existing library research is mixed. Over the years many have criticized the library and information science field for these failings.

With these issues in mind, the U.S. Department of Education invited leading professionals who work in the library field in federal agencies, universities, associations, and foundations to a meeting in Washington, DC to explore the need for national focus on library research. The purpose of the meeting was not to set a research agenda, but to explore a number of options, including whether a national structure is needed to foster and support a national research agenda that would improve and strengthen the nation's library services. The meeting, held in April 1998, was sponsored by the Department's National Institute on Postsecondary Education, Libraries, and Lifelong Learning (PLLI) and National Library of Education (NLE). Both PLLI and NLE are part of the Department's Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI). PLLI is mandated by Congress to study adults' learning experiences beyond compulsory education and in a variety of settings, including postsecondary institutions, community-based education programs, libraries, and the workplace. NLE, the largest federally funded library devoted entirely to education, is the federal government's one-stop information center for education resources.

The meeting began with each participant suggesting a research issue of particular concern to their organization and the challenges involved in supporting research on the topic. Next, the group reviewed past research related to libraries and explored ideas for future research priorities. They also examined several types of structures that promote quality research, including federally sponsored national research centers, multi-agency national research roundtables, and university-supported research centers. The meeting concluded with recommendations for further action.

While the concerns were many and the discussions lively, five critical issues continued to surface during the day-long discussion. Participants raised questions about the quality of libraries and their future role, and impact on local communities, intellectual property rights and responsibilities, and the difficulties associated with the preservation of digital and printed materials. A common thread linked these five issues: information technology.

Quality of Libraries and Information

Participants raised many questions about how to ensure the quality of tomorrow's libraries, citing concerns about managing the tremendous amount and variety of information available in an electronic library environment.

Several expressed concern about the quality of information on the Internet and the public's perceptions of it. Users often assume that information available electronically is always valid and current simply because it is online. Conversely they erroneously assume that information published in more traditional formats, such as books or magazines, is out of date simply because it is offline. Participants suggested that research is needed to combat this myth, and they pointed out a need to develop models on how to index, access, and evaluate electronic information resources. They also suggested examining how well search engines help people find appropriate information as well as examining applications of metadata to determine the best ways to retrieve and store digital information.

Future of Libraries

Over the years libraries have evolved from being primarily collections of printed information to access points for vast amounts of electronic and digital information. Even more changes are to come. Although these changes are exciting, they also bring challenging—and uncharted—new roles for libraries and librarians in organizing and structuring information for public consumption. The future organization and structure of information in a variety of print and electronic media will present numerous challenges to libraries.

While many issues were raised regarding the future of libraries, participants zeroed in on two broad concerns: the library's future role in society, and staffing and leadership issues.

Much of the discussion centered on the need for research that addresses the changing role of libraries. The advent of the Internet and other online services has changed the library from a *place* to an *information system*. In other words, libraries are no longer limited to the information they house, they have become facilities that provide electronic access to global information resources. Moreover, emerging global digital libraries are having a major impact on the way libraries operate. All this leads to major issues of access. How do libraries make information available to disparate audiences? How does global access affect local culture and economy? How does this change the library's role in influencing social connectedness or in building social capital?

While technology offers exciting new advances for libraries and librarians, it also presents challenges. With so many individuals having access to both home and office computers, how can the library field maintain public support of libraries? What should the library's role be? What do library personnel need to do to encourage the use and support of their services? Strong leadership is crucial to maintaining such support, and several participants stressed the role of research in documenting the competencies of successful, effective library leaders.

Along the same lines, several participants cited the need for knowledgeable human resources. The graying of the baby boom population means many libraries soon will begin losing institutional knowledge as long-time employees retire. At the same time, librarians need new skills, skills to meet the fast pace of today's technological advances. Librarians of the future, for example, will have to be adept at helping those with varying skill levels access global networks of electronic media and digital information. Just as importantly, librarians will have to help their clients learn to evaluate which information resources best meet their needs.

Impact of Libraries

The overwhelming majority of participants pointed out a need for research on the impact libraries have on users and society. A lack of information about how libraries currently are used makes it difficult to plan for the needs of the 21st Century. While most libraries have a record of how many people use their services and how many books are checked out yearly, participants stressed that much more information is needed, especially about the actual impact of libraries. Of special concern is how disadvantaged members of a community use libraries. Other questions raised by the group include: How does the delivery of library services make a difference to individuals and to the community? Are public libraries and university libraries used effectively by the public? How can we determine the impact of the library on lifelong learning and literacy? What is the economic impact of public libraries on a community or state?

Intellectual Property

The rights and responsibilities of authors and libraries in an electronic environment are complex new issues facing the library profession. While copyright laws were formed to protect ownership of printed materials, existing intellectual property principles and statutes do not easily translate to the electronic environment. For example, digital documents are easily downloaded, printed, transmitted, and even altered. Participants indicated intellectual property rights of

electronic and digital information raise a host of issues, such as: How does the library community make sure the author is both credited and paid? How do they ensure others don't tamper with intellectual output? What is a library's role in digital copyright issues? Intellectual property rights and responsibilities have major implications for libraries of the future.

Preservation of Digital Information

Rapidly changing technology and an increasing variety of electronic publications led to a number of questions about preservation issues. Will users 20 years from now be able to retrieve electronic files created today? What are the best methods for preserving digital materials? How can librarians effectively archive information for the future? What training is necessary to help future librarians with this task? At the same time, libraries still have archival responsibilities for printed materials, and more studies are needed to help address the challenges of conservation and preservation.

Issues Surrounding Library Research

While participants focused their discussions on research priorities, several general library research issues also surfaced. Several participants noted a lack of longitudinal studies related to libraries. Many of the research topics suggested during the meeting, such as community and economic impact and family literacy, are issues that require long-term study to provide useful findings. While acknowledging the need for such studies, the participants also pointed out that short-term research is necessary to help guide more immediate operational decisions. How can researchers bridge this gap between the need for short- and long-term studies? How can the more costly long-term studies be financed? Most everyone cited a lack of sufficient research funding, especially from the federal government, as a major problem for library research. In fact, the group noted that preliminary evidence from an upcoming OERI study[1]

1 Libraries for the Future, *Library Research: 1983–1997* U.S. Department of Education, 1998 at *http://www.ed.gov/pubs/LibraryResearch*

indicates that a minuscule amount of the federal dollars allocated to education research is applied toward library and information science projects. Participants also pointed out that a national research agenda is virtually meaningless if funding is not available.

Several said there is a need for interdisciplinary research. This led to questions about how to identify the other disciplines library researchers need to work with, such as computer and behavioral sciences and education, and how to promote library research to them. Others suggested a need to connect with research—conducted by other disciplines—which could be beneficial to library science.

Many of the participants present urged researchers to improve the dissemination of research findings and to do a better job of translating research findings into useful information for practitioners. Along the same lines, they called for connecting research to practice by involving more library practitioners in research more often. It was even suggested that preliminary research findings be made available, a bold step since this is not traditionally done.

And finally, most everyone agreed that federal agencies involved with funding library research need to look for ways to coordinate library-related research projects, especially because funding is so limited.

Possible Next Steps

At the conclusion of the meeting, OERI asked participants to suggest possible next steps that OERI could take to help address the research needs of the library field. The group made the following suggestions:

- Collaborate and coordinate any future endeavors with representatives from the public, private, foundation, academic, and industrial sectors. Participants pointed out a special need to involve the private sector in planning future activities.

- Consider forming a national library research roundtable that brings together representatives from various Federal agencies and researchers from the library field and other disciplines so they can begin talking to one another, and sharing information about existing or future studies and needs.

- Create a vision that links research needs to the real world. One way to do this is to involve practitioners and individuals from a number of disciplines in designing this vision.

- Design a national agenda to help the library and information science fields focus both on research priorities and on determining where research dollars and efforts should be directed.

- Explore the feasibility of calling for a national research center to study library issues. Participants also suggested that if OERI is going to create a center, it should first support a planning process, design a prototype, and develop a marketing plan. OERI was urged to bring together a variety of experts—library personnel, computer scientists, etc.—to accomplish this.

In general, these recommendations suggest that coordination, collaboration, leadership, and channeling the national will for improved library research comprise the primary role for OERI. OERI agreed that its follow-through effort to provide leadership to create a vision that links research needs to the real world would include a continuing partnership with representatives from the public, private, academic, foundation, and industrial sectors. Building upon the initial impetus to accomplish further recommendations would be contingent on the availability of resources through such a partnership.

Quotable Quotes

The library field is faced with a galloping new ignorance about technology that is harmful because it affects support for libraries. This new ignorance is especially harmful because it's not a 'know nothing' kind of ignorance, it's a 'know something' kind of ignorance and often that something is partial, incomplete or inaccurate. And people in high places have this galloping new ignorance and it affects support for libraries.

—Charles Curran
University of South Carolina

Lo, we have become the tools of our tools.

—Henry David Thoreau

There is such a tremendous amount of information out there. It is like drinking from a fire hydrant with a straw.

—Frank Wattenberg
National Science Foundation

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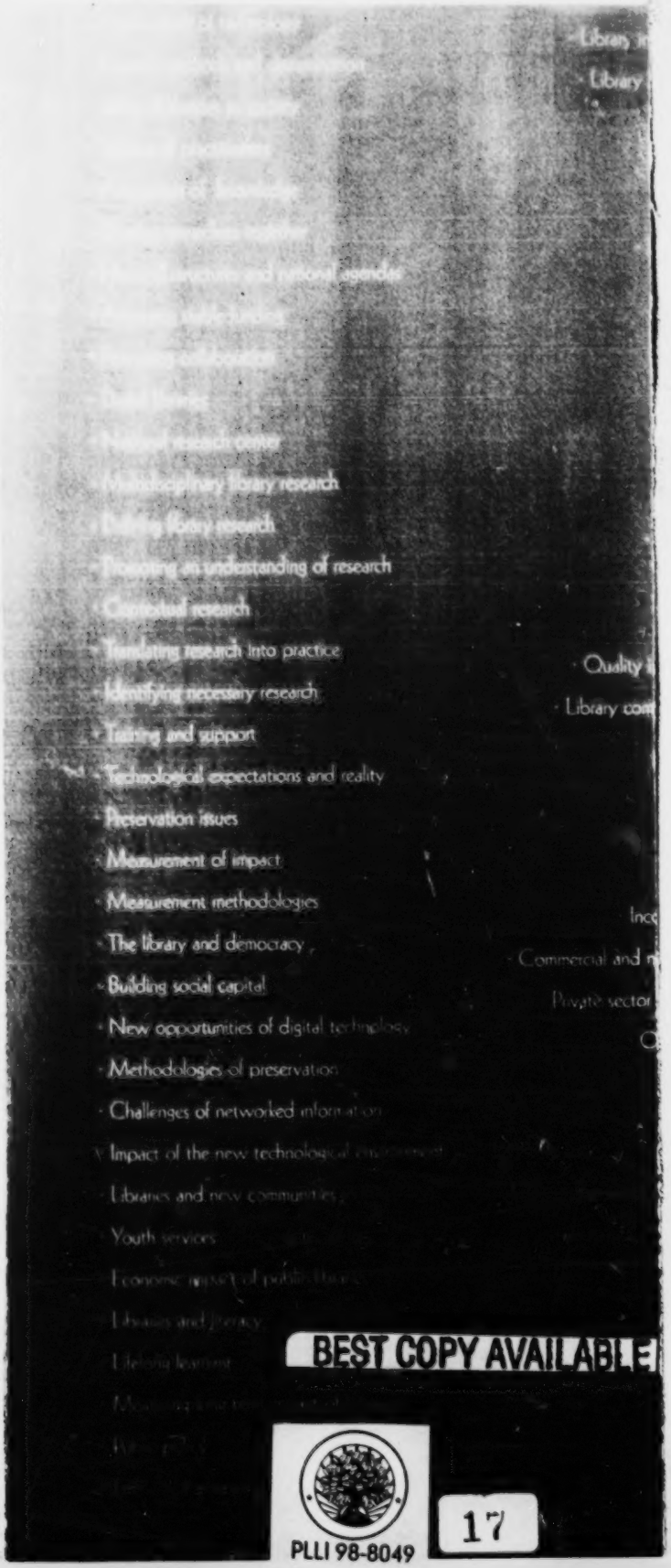

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